



Research impact: **a never ending personal and/or academic quest?**

by

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This short paper canvasses the definition, purpose, benefits and potential pitfalls as well as the need for research impact across the UK's (& global) academic research community.

Abstract

The impact of some research is evident immediately, whereas other research can take years before its real value becomes apparent. To that end, there are no simple predictors of potential benefits or outcomes and no single measure of impact. Yet, REF exercises and funding councils alike demand its endorsement in supporting research which increases our fundamental understanding of the world.

Attaining a '*demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy*' is no easy feat. A key aspect of the notion of '*research impact*' is that impact must be demonstrable. It is insufficient just to focus on activities and outputs that promote research impact. Arguably, you must be able to provide evidence that the research has been taken up and used by policymakers, legislators and/or practitioners which has led to improvements in conditions, health, services, business or the economy.

Within such a spiralling complexity of demands, this paper seeks clarity in the quest for impact. This paper therefore canvasses the dilemmas faced by researchers in search of impact. Having defined what '*research impact*' is, an assessment of what REF2020 is likely to require in terms of impact based upon lessons learnt from REF2014 will be given. Navigating through the variant types of impact, a pathway for planning *research impact* will be presented, whilst musing on the personal and academic rewards involved. Overall, the paper will review what has become of *research impact* in academia today and will posit a timely reminder to all involved in research that: when published works influence and inform other research, the '*revealed preference*' approach to understanding academic influence, albeit in recent years has become increasingly sophisticated, remains the very core of ideas and expertise which flows from the individual researcher's study.

What is impact?

Research Councils UK (RCUK) defines research impact as '*the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy*'¹.

As it stands research impact embraces many diverse ways that research-related skills benefit individuals, organisations and even nations. As such, RCUK lists and identifies them as:

- fostering global economic performance, and specifically the economic competitiveness of the United Kingdom;
- increasing the effectiveness of public services and policy; and,
- enhancing quality of life, health and creative output.

Amidst the highest quality research is the core feature that research impact which is that the impact must be demonstrable. To that end, you must be able to provide evidence of research impact. For instance, that it has been taken up and used by policymakers and/or practitioners which have led to improvement(s).

Types of research impact

Research impact is and should be multi-disciplinary and multi-faceted. Accordingly, it can be categorised, as follows:

- *Academic impact* is the demonstrable contribution that excellent social and economic research makes to scientific advances, across and within disciplines, including significant advances in understanding, method, theory and application;
- *Economic/societal impact* is the demonstrable contribution that excellent social and economic research makes to society and the economy, of benefit to individuals, organisations and nations;
- *Instrumental impact* is influencing the development of policy, practice or service provision, shaping legislation, altering behaviour;

¹ <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/innovation/impacts/>

- *Conceptual impact* is contributing to the understanding of policy issues, reframing debates; and,
- *Capacity building impact* is through technical and personal skill development.

This typology reinforces the point that Research Councils in the UK reaffirm that impact is broadly defined in 2 camps, as either:

- *Academic* – which is the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to academic advances, across and within disciplines, including significant advances in understanding, methods, theory and application;

or,

- *Economic* - which is the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy.

Such dual typology highlights that in either generic mode, there exists an implied commonality that public engagement is included and that engaging the public with your research can improve the quality of research and its impact, raise your profile, and develop your skills. It also enables the public to act as informed citizens and can inspire the next generation of researchers.

REF and research impact

In the recent REF2014 there was an explicit element to assess the 'impact' arising from excellent research². It was an assessment of impact based on expert review of case studies submitted by HEIs. Case studies included any social, economic or cultural impact or benefit beyond academia that has taken place during the assessment period, and was underpinned by excellent research produced by the submitting institution. A weighting of 20% for impact would give due recognition to the economic and social benefits of excellent research.

² <http://www.ref.ac.uk/>

Therefore, to plan impact effectively you need to:

- identify your key stakeholders, for example, other researchers; public sector; business/industry;
- identify how they will benefit from your research – types of impact might include: improving social welfare/public services; influencing public policy; contributing to operational/organisational change;
- identify how you will ensure they have the opportunity to benefit, for example through organising public events; conferences; interaction with the media.

Post-REF, all of the UK's research councils are exploring new methods for assessing the impact of the research, in order to demonstrate the broader contribution to society and the economy. This forms part of the new strategic emphasis on impact assessment alongside bibliometrics and international benchmarking.

The quest for 'impact'

Within academia, there has long been a disparagement of 'bean counting' research assessment exercises. In the modern, digital era, the responsibility of academic researchers is to plan their research carefully from the outset, paying at least some attention to what 'works' in terms of influencing other researchers or the public. Each academic researcher has a responsibility for having the highest quality information about how their existing 'works' (research loosely defined) are achieving impact.

Such 'research impact' is defined as '*a recorded or otherwise auditable occasion of influence from academic research on another actor or organization*'. Impact is usually demonstrated by pointing to a recorded citation, referencing or other use of the research by another researcher. A digital footprint demonstrating impact would include collecting the subjective views of a relevant audience or observing the objective behaviour of members of that audience.

The usual academic impacts are most objectively demonstrated by citation indicators. According to Harzing (2010)³, this is the accepted 'revealed preference' approach to understanding academic influence. More effective approaches include surveys of

³ Harzing, A.W. (2010) The Publish or Perish Book: Your guide to effective and responsible citation analysis, Melbourne: Tarma Software Research.

professional groups, academics virtual voting and open-access online peer group evaluations. Research has an '*(external) impact*' when an auditable or recorded influence is achieved upon a non-academic organization or actor in a sector outside the university sector itself – for instance, by being used by a business corporation, a government agency, a civil society organization or a media or specialist/professional media organization. As is the case with research impact, it must have an external impact which needs to be demonstrated rather than assumed. Evidence of external impacts can take the form of references to, citations of or discussion of a person or work or idea, concept, finding:

- in a practitioner or commercial document;
- in media or specialist media outlets;
- in the records of meetings, conferences, seminars, working groups and other interchanges;
- in the speeches or statements of authoritative actors; or
- via inclusions or referencing or web links to research documents in an external organization's websites or intranets;
- in the funding, commissioning or contracting of research or research-based consultancy from university teams or academics; and
- in the direct involvement of academics in decision-making in government agencies, government or professional advisory committees, business corporations or interest groups, and trade unions, charities or other civil society organizations⁴.

Research impact nowadays must therefore have a credible and reported/recorded footprint which evidences the actual impact.

Conclusions

The RCUK's (2010) review of '*Pathways to Impact*' reaffirmed that public engagement in research ensured that impact was its core focus. Furthermore, it reiterated the RCUK's commitment to investing £3bn of public funding in excellent research to bring about positive impact in our society, including the economy.

Yet, the primary criterion remains research excellence. RCUK introduced '*Pathways to Impact*' in order to encourage academic researchers to think about what can be done to ensure your research makes a difference. Through '*Pathways to Impact*' academic researchers are to explore, from the outset and throughout the life of the project and

⁴ King's College London and Digital Science, (2015), *Nature, scale and beneficiaries of research impact: An initial analysis of REF 2014 impact case studies*. Bristol: HEFCE.

beyond, the potential benefit(s) from research and what research can do to help make this happen.

The current received wisdom from RCUK is that research active academics should consider the future impact of research at the point of applying for funding. UK HE Funding Bodies, in context of the REF, assesses the historic evidence of impact. All funders have a common understanding of the importance of societal and economic as well as academic impact.

Consequently, the central message of the evolving importance of 'impact' in research is that a clearly thought through and acceptable. Digital footprints are now an essential component of a research proposal and a condition of funding. In future, research grants will not be allowed to start until a 'Pathways to Impact' statement is received.

A clearly thought through and acceptable 'Pathways to Impact' statement should:

- be project-specific and not generalised; and,
- be flexible and focus on potential outcomes;

Academic researchers are therefore encouraged to:

- identify and actively engage relevant users of research and stakeholders at appropriate stages;
- articulate a clear understanding of the context and needs of users and consider ways for the proposed research to meet these needs or impact upon understandings of these needs;
- outline the planning and management of associated activities including timing, personnel, skills, budget, deliverables and feasibility;
- include evidence of any existing engagement with relevant end users.

It is expected that being able to describe a 'pathway to impact' will apply for the vast majority of proposals in the future.

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ⁱ Diamond Jubilee Professor of Law, University of Bolton.